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“It takes A Village”: An Examination of Intra-local Collaborative Economic Development Practices in Ontario, Canada, during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

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"IT TAKES A VILLAGE": AN EXAMINATION OF INTRA-LOCAL COLLABORATIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES IN ONTARIO, CANADA, DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Keywords: Collaboration; Localities; Economic development; Practitioners; COVID-19 pandemic; Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Local economic development officials are tasked with the responsibility of initiating projects and programs to enhance the material and socio-economic well-being of their communities. This responsibility requires that resources within communities are effectively harnessed for maximum use, especially as the responsibility of local economic development has been increasingly downloaded from upper-level governments onto localities (Cleave et al., 2017; Donald, 2005). In practice, it requires local economic development practitioners to work closely with a diverse set of actors and interest groups in communities. Unfortunately, this does not always occur, as local economic development practitioners have generally acted in isolation from other local actors, such as community organizations, businesses, and municipal agencies. This siloed approach to economic development hinders practitioners' ability to effectively support and enhance their local economies' growth and development as they forgo vital resources, made available through local partnerships, that can bolster their economic development efforts. A small number of scholars and commentators have repeatedly stressed the importance of collaborative practices between practitioners and broader stakeholders within communities for local economic development (Leibovitz, 2003; Leigh & Blakely, 2017). Local collaborative efforts are seen as essential to increase the resources available to practitioners, develop a single collective voice for the community, increase local capacity, gain greater political influence through strength in numbers, improve awareness of community needs, and enhance local problem-solving.

The enormous scale of the ongoing 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the impact it is having on communities naturally calls for a united front and a need to harness communities' entire resources to deal with the crisis. However, due primarily to the recency of the onset of the pandemic, the extent to which local economic development efforts have gravitated towards collaborative practices has not been investigated. Therefore, this paper explores local practitioners' perspectives and actions during the pandemic to determine the extent to which the ongoing pandemic has provided the platform for, and facilitated economic development practices toward intra-local collaboration in Ontario, Canada. Localities in Ontario are of special interest to examine as current research, prior to the pandemic, indicates that local practitioners in communities in Ontario tend to act in isolation. That is, they do not collaborate with their local counterparts in their economic development efforts (Leibovitz, 2003). However, although economic development strategies typically evolve slowly over time, crises, like the 2008 Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, can rapidly speed up the evolution of economic development strategies, resulting in new practices and behaviours among local practitioners and actors, such as intra-local collaborative practices (Bradford, 2010; Leigh & Blakely, 2017). Given the ongoing pandemic crisis, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions: Have economic development practitioners in localities in Ontario embraced intra-local collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, in what ways and to what extent? As well, what barriers do they face in their attempts to undertake intra-local collaborative practices?

The specific objective of this paper is to determine if there has been a shift in practitioners' economic development efforts, in localities in Ontario during the pandemic, away from siloed approaches toward intra-local collaborative practices. In this paper, intra-local collaboration is defined as "the process of facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations" (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003: 4).

In-depth interviews with thirty-seven senior local economic development practitioners from various localities in Ontario were conducted from 2021 to 2022 to answer the aforementioned research questions. In doing so, this paper contributes to the economic development literature, highlighting the importance of intra-local collaborative practices for local economic development. Also, it provides a greater understanding of contemporary economic development efforts in localities in Ontario, which can be used to inform future provincial and local policy formulation in the province aimed at enhancing economic development practices, especially concerning intra-local collaboration. Furthermore, it provides a synopsis of the evolution of economic development strategies in North America.

The paper is structured as follows. Section two provides an overview of local economic development, intra-local collaborative practices, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic with a particular focus on Ontario. Section three presents the methodology. Section four explores the results. Section five provides a brief discussion and concludes.

BACKGROUND

Local Economic Development

Economic development policies and programs aim to support local economies and enhance their social and economic well-being during stable and turbulent times. Particularly, in their efforts to ensure the development and growth of their local economies, economic development practitioners have three main objectives: achieve local economic stability, build a diverse economic and employment base, and promote local sustainability. The desired outcome of these objectives is to increase the local tax base, increase local residents' incomes and wages, create adequate and good-paying jobs, build local capacity, and reduce inequality and poverty, among others (Arku, 2015; Leigh & Blakely, 2017). Achieving these objectives and producing the desired outcomes is a difficult task. In stable times, practitioners have to contend with various internal challenges, such as limited capacity, insufficient resources, bureaucracy and political ineptness, as well as external challenges, such as global economic restructuring, increased global competitiveness, and economic uncertainty (e.g., global supply chain disruptions). These challenges have produced an economic landscape marked by sophisticated and complex problems, which practitioners must contend with in their economic development efforts (Head & Alford, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973). In turbulent times, the normal challenges that practitioners face are exacerbated, as they have to deal with an array of economic upheavals, such as plant closures, mass lay-offs, out-migration, economic shocks, among others (Sutton & Arku, 2022a; 2022b). In their attempt to overcome these challenges, practitioners are often compelled to employ a wide range of economic development practices—an approach described as 'shoot anything that flies and claim anything that falls' (Rubin, 1988).

However, the range of local economic development practices undertaken by practitioners has not been static but has evolved slowly over time. In total, scholars have identified five waves of local economic development practice in North America (Figure 1). The first-wave started in the 1930s and was characterized by 'smokestack chasing' approaches aimed at attracting mobile capital (i.e., firms). In this wave, practitioners' practices focused on using public funds to influence the location of large private firms through tax abatements, loan packages, and land and facility subsidies. The second-wave, which began in the late 1970s, focused on business retention and expansion, and supporting the creation of new enterprises via establishing small business support centres and incubators, providing expansion loans and technical assistance, and offering incentives

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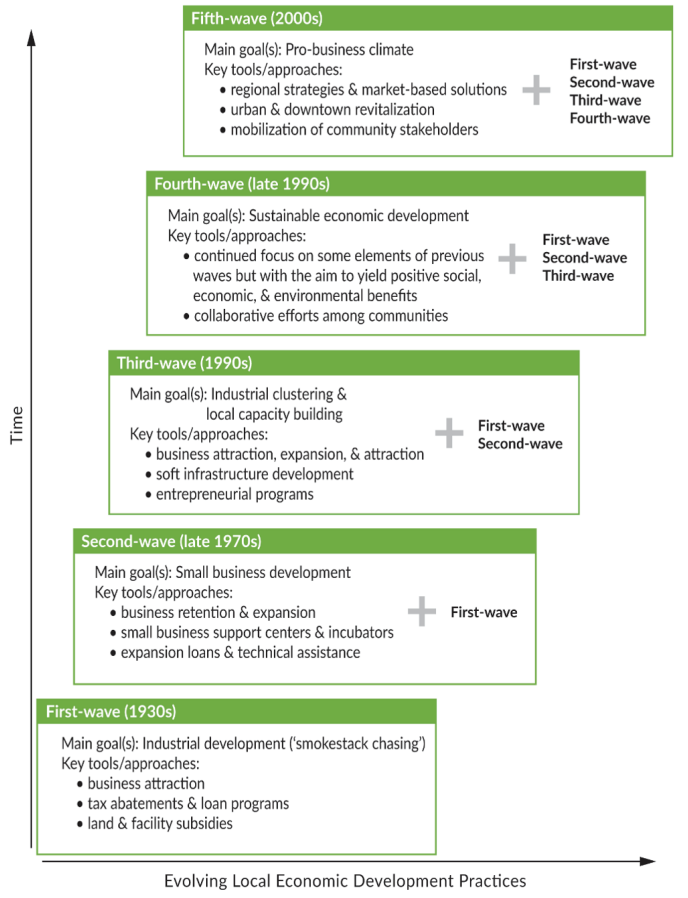
to less competitive local businesses. The main aim of practitioners' practices during the second wave was to stimulate endogenous growth, especially among small- and medium-sized businesses. The third-wave emerged in the 1990s and focused on business retention, expansion, and attraction through cost-effective means, such as soft infrastructure development, entrepreneurial programs, and public-private partnerships. Third-wave practices focused on building local capacity (e.g., enhancing firms' technological capabilities and the skills of the labour forces), using regional/local resources to support the growth of industrial clusters, and developing regional networks, with the overarching intent of increasing localities' productivity and global competitiveness (Arku & Oosterbaan, 2015; Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999; Leigh & Blakely, 2017; Olberding, 2002; Zheng & Warner, 2010).

The fourth-wave, which began in the late 1990s, was marked by sustainable economic development practices that focused on enhancing economic self-sufficiency, quality of life, and environmental sensitivity and responsibility. In particular, practitioners' practices in the fourth-wave aimed to yield positive social, economic, and environmental benefits through such strategies as promoting renewable energy and green technology. The fifth-wave started in the 2000s and is characterized by regional strategies and market-based solutions to local economic development, with the underlying assumption that what is good for the economy is also good for society (Leigh & Blakely, 2017). In the fifth-wave, practitioners are "called on to identify unmet demand, provide government facilitation and financing, and encourage public-private partnerships for minority firms and market developments" (Leigh & Blakely, 2017: 63). In other words, fifth-wave practices focus on developing a pro-business climate.

Figure 1. Five waves of economic development practice



Overall, the five waves of local economic development practice are accumulative, broadening practitioners' economic development practices rather than each new wave resulting in the obsolescence of practices from prior waves. Practices from each wave are still employed by practitioners to this day (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999; Leigh & Blakely, 2017; Osgood et al., 2012; Zheng & Warner, 2010). Furthermore, the five waves of economic development practice closely follow the structural transformation of North America's economy (Arku and Oosterbaan, 2015), indicating that practitioners' economic development practices evolve in response to their changing economic landscape.

As indicated above, economic development is an evolving process. However, in turbulent times practitioners tend to revamp their economic development practices to adapt to their rapidly changing economic environment (Arku, 2015; Arku & Oosterbaan, 2015; Tomaney et al., 2010; Wolfson & Frisken, 2000). For example, economic development practices in some states in the USA shifted away from traditional practices to new and innovative approaches to economic development–focusing on innovation, cluster-based development, economic gardening, and entrepreneurship–following the 2008 Great Recession (Renault, 2012; also see Oh et al., 2014). Similarly, economic development practices in London, Ontario, shifted towards social sustainability following the same recession (Bradford, 2010). Thus, as illustrated, crises can result in sudden shifts in economic development practices and approaches.

Intra-local Collaboration, Ontario, and the COVID-19 pandemic

Collaborative governance, specifically collaborative public management, is a flourishing field that has received substantive attention since the early 2000s (McGuire, 2006; O'Leary & Vij, 2012; Wolfe & Creutzberg, 2003). Collaboration has been widely advocated for in the literature to address local challenges, as they require the collective efforts of an array of actors to resolve (Head & Alford, 2015). In the context of local economic development, collaboration has been dichotomized into two forms: inter- and intra-local collaboration, with the former tending to be the primary focus in urban and local studies (see, for example, Arku, 2014; Arku & Oosterbaan, 2015; Gordon, 2007, 2009; Osgood et al., 2012). In comparison, little attention has been paid to the intra-local collaborative practices of practitioners, despite acknowledgements in the literature of the importance of such practices for local economic development (Leibovitz, 2003; Leigh & Blakely, 2017; McGuire, 2000). The lack of attention received by intra-local economic development practices is puzzling as the economic well-being of localities is central to urban studies and local economic development research (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). Further, examining intra-local collaboration is vital for implementing evidence-based policies and enhancing local economic development efforts within developed and developing economies.

In particular, intra-local collaboration is important for the economic development of local economies because practitioners do not always have the necessary resources (i.e., know-how, financial, human resources, etc.) needed to appropriately and effectively undertake economic development. Thus, collaborating with various local actors enhances practitioners' access to essential resources (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Leigh & Blakely, 2017; Oh et al., 2014). According to Leigh & Blakely (2017), authority and resources are the two central components practitioners must possess to engage in economic development. Without the latter component, economic development becomes increasingly more difficult.

To complicate the matter, resources have become increasingly scarce as economic development responsibilities have been downloaded from upper-level governments onto localities without an accompanying increase in their resources (Cleave et al., 2017; Donald, 2005; Swyngedouw 2004), which further intensifies the need for intra-lo-

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cal collaboration. As McGuire (2000: 280) notes, "[resources] that cities need to put forth or sustain a concerted development effort are often held by multiple actors". This partly explains the increase in public-private partnerships that have emerged over the past several decades (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999; Harvey, 1989; Leigh & Blakely, 2017), as the private sector has a greater ability to raise the necessary resources, such as funds, to engage in economic development. In other words, the increased responsibility placed on localities to ensure their social and economic well-being has intensified the need for practitioners to collaborate with local private and public organizations to bolster or simply undertake economic development. The need for intra-local collaboration becomes especially important as practitioners engage in more innovative or high-road economic development practices, such as incubators, research and development, and skill development programs (McGuire, 2000).

In the case of Ontario, Canada, practitioners have traditionally engaged in economic development in isolation, often employing a more siloed approach. While there is evidence that practitioners have exhibited a greater willingness to engage in inter-local or inter-territorial collaboration in Ontario (Arku, 2014; Arku & Oosterbaan, 2015), there is no evidence to indicate a simultaneous increase in intra-local collaborative practices. In fact, Leibovitz (2003), when examining the collaborative efforts in Canada's technology triangle in the Waterloo city-region, notes that many barriers remain to intra-local collaboration, such as distrust between local authorities and mutual suspicion of public and private actors. The lack of intra-local collaborative practices among practitioners indicates that there is room to improve economic development efforts by engaging in more collaborative approaches with local actors; for example, to improve practitioners' access to vital resources. Thus, this paper seeks to determine if there has been a concerted effort to embrace such practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like most advanced economies, Ontario has been adversely impacted economically by the COVID-19 pandemic, (for an overview, see Hall & Vinodrai, 2021; Slade, 2022). This should come as no surprise, however, as the 2020 global recession that followed the pandemic has been the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, causing the global economy to contract by approximately five percent in 2020 (International Monetary Fund 2020; World Bank 2020). The first reported COVID-19 case in Ontario was in Toronto (Goddard, 2020) and has since spread throughout the province. From its onset, the province has experienced four waves of COVID-19 (i.e., spikes in COVID-19 cases). As of July 18, 2022, the province has had roughly 1.3 million COVID-19 cases with 14.7 thousand COVID-19 related deaths. The province accounts for nearly one-third of the cases and deaths in the country (CTV News 2022). Further, the province has been economically devastated by several lockdown measures aimed at containing the spread of the coronavirus, which in turn halted economic activity for significant periods at a time. In total, the province has experienced three provincial-wide lockdowns and one partial provincial-wide lockdown (Nielsen, 2021). Simply put, the pandemic has created a turbulent economic environment for residents, communities, and economies, as well as practitioners who are entrusted with safeguarding and retooling their local economies.

METHODS

This paper investigates senior economic development practitioners' perceptions and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine if there has been a concerted effort to embrace intra-local collaborative practices in the Province of Ontario. The data for this paper draws on in-depth interviews with senior economic development practitioners (henceforth practitioners) from a range of Ontario communities. Ontario is one of ten provinces that comprise Canada's federal system. Ontario is Canada's most populous province, with roughly 14.2 million inhabitants (i.e., 38.5% of the country's population) (Statistics Canada, 2021). In addition, the Province of Ontario is also one of Canada's heartlands and its main economic hub, producing over one-third of the country's national gross domestic product (Ontario Government, 2021). The data gathered from the interviews provide insight into local economic development efforts in various communities throughout the province, enabling this paper to address its aforementioned research questions.

Table 1. Demographics of practitioners' locality

Locality	Population	Locality Status
Bradford West Gwillimbury	42,880	Town
Brampton	656,480	City
Brockville	22,116	City
Caledon	76,581	Town
East Gwillimbury	34,637	Town
Almaguin*	46,909	Town
Gravenhurst	13,157	Town
Grey County	100,905	City
Grey Highlands	10,424	Town
Guelph	143,740	City
Haldimand County	49,216	County
Hamilton	569,353	City
Kawartha Lakes	79,247	City
Kitchener	256,885	City
Lincoln	25,719	Town
London	422,324	City
Minto	9,094	Town
Mississauga	717,961	City
Niagara Region	477,941	Region
Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands	2,641	Town
Orillia	33,411	City
Owen Sound	21,612	City
Pembroke	14,364	City
Renfrew County	106,365	County
Saugeen Shores	15,908	Town
Simcoe County	533,169	County
South Bruce Peninsula	9,137	Town
South Dundas	11,044	Town
Temiskaming Shore	9,634	City
Thunder Bay	108,843	City
Tillsonburg	18,615	Town
Vaughan	323,103	City
Wellington County	241,026	County
Whitchurch-Stouffville	49,864	Town
Woodstock	46,705	City

Note: Locality Size is based on Statistics Canada's 2016 classification;
*Almaguin is a newly established locality, previously part of Parry Sound; therefore, Parry Sound demographics are used as a proxy because no population counts are currently available for Almaguin.
Source: Statistics Canada (2021)

In particular, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-seven practitioners from various localities in the province from 2021 to 2022 (Table 1). Practitioners were selected based on their responsibilities to ensure the social and economic well-being of communities during stable and turbulent periods, by employing a wide range of economic development strategies. Therefore, due to their assigned role in local economies, practitioners provide crucial insight into the economic development practices in localities. This study aimed to

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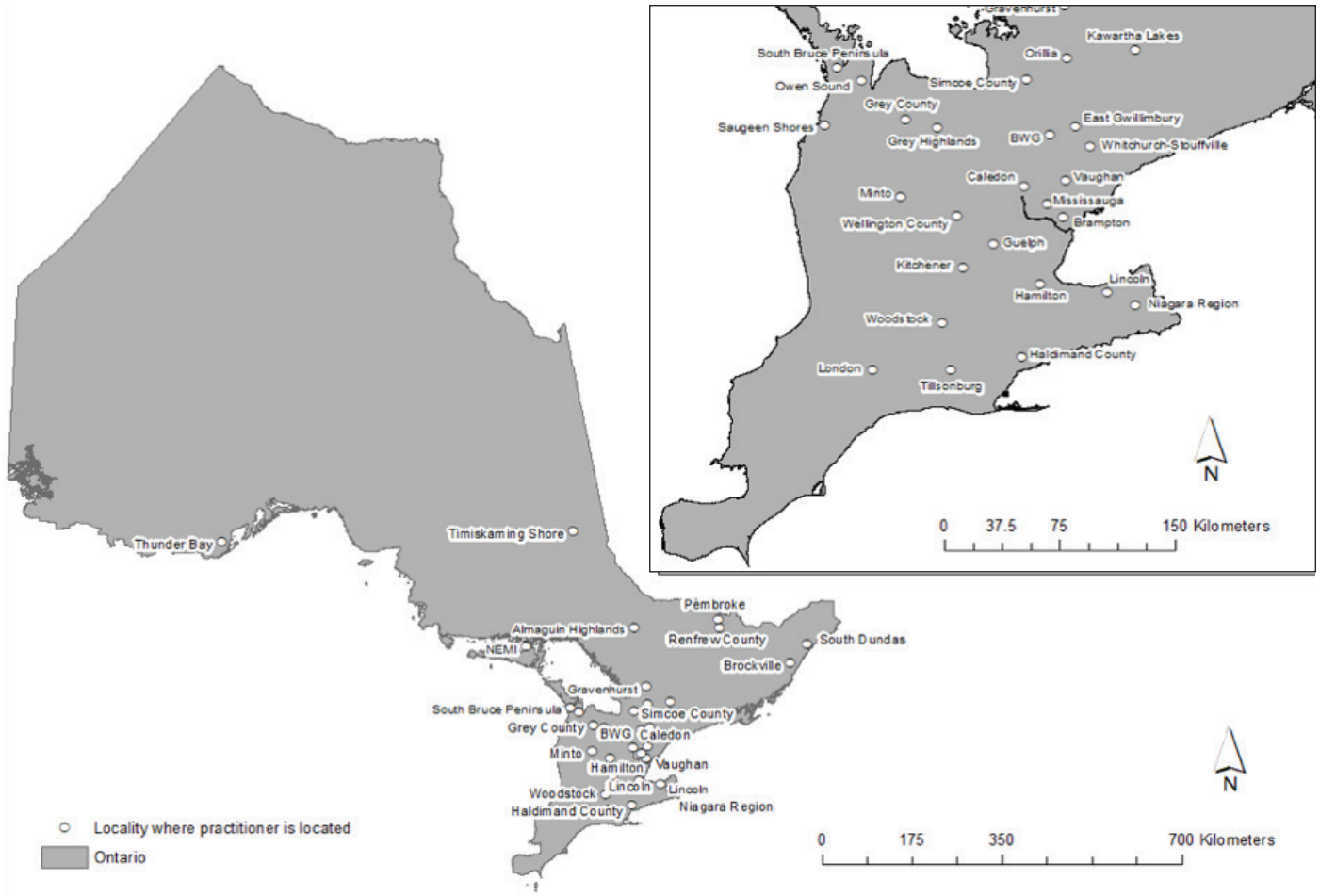
Figure 2. Location of interviewed practitioners



interview one practitioner per locality. However, on two occasions, an additional practitioner from the same economic development office spontaneously joined the interview.[1] Additionally, the study aimed to interview practitioners from various localities throughout Ontario with the goal of obtaining a representative sample across the province based on localities' geographical location (i.e., northern and southern Ontario) and size (i.e., small, medium, and large). This sampling strategy was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of local economic development efforts and practices during the pandemic by interviewing a diverse set of practitioners. Regardless of our repeated efforts, not all practitioners contacted responded to our invitation to participate in the interviews. Therefore, the final sample consists of those who accepted and participated in the study. Precisely, thirty-five practitioners out of over 50 contacted were interviewed for the study, with two additional impromptu participants joining in, resulting in a final sample of thirty-seven participants. The distribution of the final sample reflects the geographical distribution of the province's population (Figure 2), providing a good representative sample.[2]

The interviews were semi-structured, with interviewees being asked open-ended questions to allow the interviewers to follow up with probing questions. Furthermore, to generate more in-depth and comprehensive responses, questions were sent out to participants prior to the interview. On average, the duration of the interview was an hour. A grounded and inductive approach was used to ensure the rigour of the analysis. Specifically, the evaluation criteria of transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability were employed to ensure the study accurately represents interviewees' responses while situating their experiences in the larger context of economic development in Ontario (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Moreover, this approach enables the paper to collect a wide breadth of rich data that cannot be collected through other methodological approaches, such as quantitative techniques (Gordon, 2009). The research objective guided the interviews.

Using NVivo software, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the data, the interviews were manually vetted a second time by two researchers. Codes were developed based on a thematic analysis of the data and vetted line-by-line, as this is suggested to be the most accurate coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The thematic analysis allowed this paper to systematically address its research questions and overall objective.

It is worth pointing out that this paper is part of a larger research project to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local economic development processes and practices in Ontario. Therefore, only questions from the interview pertaining to this paper's research questions were examined.

1 Therefore, thirty-seven practitioners were interviewed from thirty-five localities.

2 Practitioners from more notable localities, such as Toronto, Ottawa, and Windsor, were not interviewed because they did not respond to invitations to participate in the study, despite multiple invitations being sent.

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Table 2. Themes and summary of findings

Themes	Summary
Intensification of intra-local collaborative practices	Intra-local collaboration existed in some limited capacity among practitioners and various actors (i.e., community organizations, businesses, and municipal departments) in Ontario communities prior to the pandemic. However, the upheaval caused by the pandemic resulted in local actors either intensifying local partnerships or creating new ones. Practitioners indicated that they would continue these collaborative practices even after the pandemic. The underlying logic behind such collaborative practices was that 'it takes a village' to effectively enhance the economic development and growth of local economies. In other words, siloed approaches hinder practitioners' full capacity to undertake economic development.
Reasons for intra-local collaboration	Practitioners engage in intra-local collaborative practices for three main reasons. First, local partnerships increased practitioners' access to resources. Second, through intra-local collaboration, practitioners were able to enhance their learning of best practices and acquisition of knowledge. Third, practitioners were able to improve their capacity to market their local economy through local partnerships. Overall, the three reasons brought forth by practitioners helped them to support their local economies through the pandemic and enhance their own economic development efforts.
Barriers to intra-local collaboration	There were two main barriers that practitioners faced in their attempts to undertake intra-local collaboration during the pandemic. First, local actors were fatigued by the challenges brought on by the pandemic, which to some degree, limited their overall engagement in practitioners' collaborative projects. Second, practitioners did not have the staffing capacity to undertake broader and larger collaborative projects because many local economic development staff were furloughed periodically during the pandemic.

RESULTS

The overall findings from this paper indicate that intra-local collaboration has increased in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as noted by the interviewees, is expected to continue going forth. Table 2 provides a summary of the three main themes that emerged from the interviews. The following three subsections will explore these themes in-depth. In no particular order, this paper refers to practitioners numerically, ranging from 1 to 37, with a prefix of 'P' to denote practitioner.

Intensifying Collaborative Practices: *"It takes a village"*

Increased Intra-local Collaboration

Intra-local collaborative practices among economic development practitioners existed to a limited extent and in a limited capacity, in communities in Ontario, prior to the pandemic. Several practitioners noted that they had, to varying degrees, collaborative partnerships with their local businesses, community organizations, and other municipal departments. When asked about the extent of their collaborative partnerships, one practitioner commented, "our business network, which is our Chamber of Commerce and Business Improvement Areas... we've always had good relationships with them, and we've always had meetings on a quarterly basis" (P25). In a similar vein, another practitioner noted, "I really think that drawing on others... to try to get through this has been one of the key factors. And like I said, I'm just thankful that I had those relationships and knew those people... because I'm not sure. I think I probably would have burnt out" during the pandemic without those supportive relationships (P24). The practitioners that had engaged in economic development prior to the onset of the pandemic noted that they had done so to undertake various economic development programs. For example, one practitioner noted, regarding their pre-pandemic partnerships, "I work closely with three employment agencies locally here because we run our own immigration program" (P06). Another example of intra-local collaboration prior to the pandemic was brought forth by one practitioner, stating, "[we] worked very closely with local incubators and accelerators" (P04).

An emerging theme from the interviews was that regardless of the level of pre-pandemic intra-local collaboration, the pandemic intensified pre-existing partnerships or resulted in the development of new partnerships. For instance, one practitioner commented regarding their intra-local partnerships, "we started that pre-pandemic, but the pandemic really cemented that group" (P23). Another practitioner noted that they developed intra-local collaborative partnerships during the pandemic, stating, "we developed a phenomenal relationship since COVID" (P24). Along the same line, one practitioner commented as follows: "... the heads of our Chamber of Commerce, our mayors, our CEOs, Tourism Board said... we have no idea what we're in for, we should all stand together and figure it out. So, we created [a local organization]" (P22). The new or intensified partnerships consisted of an array of local actors, such as businesses, educational institutions and school boards, community organizations (including different ethnic and marginalized groups), faith-based organizations, and other municipal agencies. The majority of practitioners noted that intra-local collaboration increased during the pandemic because they were all facing common issues, such as business closures and job losses.

In their intensified or new local partnerships, practitioners engaged in various collaborative activities, such as local marketing campaigns, community outreach and development programs, business workshops, food delivery services to vulnerable populations, among others. Another example of intra-local collaborative activities includes local business support programs, with one practitioner noting that during the pandemic, they "worked closely with [businesses] in delivering the Digital Main Street program, which has been hugely popular and successful" (P18). Even further, another example of intra-local collaboration during the pandemic noted by practitioners was increased public consultation. As expressed by one practitioner, "we updated our city's strategic plan, which was another thing that we didn't necessarily have time to do, but we did it anyway with public consultation... it was kind of done with COVID in mind" (P14).

The majority of practitioners indicated that they wanted to maintain the increased intra-local collaboration going forth, suggesting that the shift towards local collaboration economic development practices may be permanent in Ontario rather than transitory. Typical comments from the practitioners include statements such as, "We all worked really well together through the process and will continue to build this and continue to have strong relationships" (P25). Similarly, one practitioner commented, "there's an opportunity for continual ongoing engagement with the business community to better understand their needs and make sure that our activities are aligning with the needs of the business community" (P10). With strong beliefs that the new local collaborative efforts will be sustainable, one practitioner noted the following with conviction: "moving forward, that's what you're going to see... if we start to introduce a plan, we will obviously have done public consultations" (P06).

The shift towards intra-local collaborative practices was underpinned by the logic that effective economic development is a collective endeavour, resulting from the interaction and support of all local actors.

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As expressed by one practitioner, "it takes a village to raise the [local economy]" (P24). The same practitioner stated, "I guess a lesson that I've learned is that you can't do it on your own terms. Certainly, the economic development successes that we've had are not a result of one person". The underlying logic that effective economic development requires a collective effort was stressed repeatedly throughout the interviews as practitioners noted that collaborative approaches provide greater direction for local economies as a whole, with one official stating, "I learned that having the community on one page with shared goals and visions is paramount" for economic development (P20). In summary, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of intra-local collaboration for effective local economic development.

Reasons for Collaboration: *"They want to learn from each other"*

Practitioners noted several reasons why they engaged in intra-local collaboration during the pandemic. Three main reasons, in particular, were commonly stated by interviewed practitioners: (1) increased access to resources, (2) enhanced learning and the acquisition of knowledge, and (3) improved local marketing.

First, practitioners engaged in intra-local collaboration to enhance their access to resources (i.e., funds, know-how, and staff capacity) they needed to undertake economic development during the pandemic. For example, one practitioner noted that they collaborated with their local chamber of commerce because "[the chamber of commerce] would do most of the implementation on [their collaborative projects] because they had the resources to do that" (P27). The same practitioner went on to state that they engaged in collaborative activities with another local department because "they didn't have the depth of knowledge that [their local department] did on some of this stuff, and [the local department] had dedicated resources [such as staff] who were just focused on that". In the same vein, one practitioner commented, regarding a collaborative project with their local chamber of commerce, "the chamber would figure out a better way to do it. And they would run things from there. It became clear that they just needed access to resources" (P22). The previous practitioner's comment emphasized the importance of 'know-how' as a resource needed to effectively undertake certain tasks. Overall, the ability to access resources from various local actors during the pandemic was found to be a prominent theme, with some practitioners stating that they would not have been able to engage in the same amount of economic development during the pandemic if they were not able to draw on other local actors' resources.

Several examples of local actors' (including practitioners) pooling resources (know-how, staffing, money, etc.) to engage in economic development, during the pandemic, were provided by the interviewees. For instance, one practitioner noted, "We worked with our two Community Futures Organizations... They provided a loan program, and we funded it... just over a hundred thousand dollars that we provided for [local] businesses" (P03). Another practitioner (P27) stated, regarding their intra-local collaboration activities during the pandemic,

> "We had to reach out to our businesses throughout this pandemic, and they were struggling. We didn't have the capability to coach them... We put them in touch with the Business Enterprise Centre, and they made sure that you were taken care of from A to Z all the way through whatever it was you needed".

These two examples highlight the varying degrees of intra-local collaboration between local actors. Some were highly integrated and complex, as in the first example, and some were less integrated and rather simplistic, as in the second example.

Second, the majority of practitioners interviewed engaged in intra-local collaboration in order to learn, especially about best practices, and acquire knowledge about their local economy. For instance, one practitioner stated, regarding their intra-local collaborative group, that it "still continues on to this day simply because we have realized the importance of sharing a lot of best practices and sharing information" (P33). Likewise, another practitioner commented, "We're really fortunate to have an engaged business community, and we work directly with industries to facilitate roundtables and have our industry leaders share their best practices" (P10). Further, practitioners engaged in intra-local collaboration to acquire knowledge regarding the state of their local economy and how they could assist actors throughout the pandemic. An example of acquiring knowledge through intra-local collaboration was noted by one practitioner (P33), who stated

> "between myself, the Business Improvement Area, and the chamber of commerce, we split up [a business contact list] and contacted probably about 30 [businesses] each just to make sure that we were... getting any information from them and sort of pointing them in the direction of what support was available".

In sum, interviewees stressed the importance of co-learning and acquiring knowledge through joint ventures with local actors (e.g., practitioners, businesses, and community organizations) to enhance their capacity to operate through the turbulent economic landscape produced by the pandemic.

Practitioners also engaged in intra-local collaboration to learn and acquire knowledge, during the pandemic, in order to address common issues (e.g., supply chain disruptions, increased unemployment, business closures, etc.) among local actors. For example, one practitioner (P27) noted that through collaboration, they were able to address common local issues, stating,

> "there was nothing brilliant about it. It was just recognizing that we're all struggling with the same things... we're all trying to bring a lot of brains around the table. And it was nice to know there were other people who were being innovative and looking at interesting ways to try to support our business community".

Simply put, practitioners emphasized that intra-local collaboration facilitated learning and the acquisition of knowledge, resulting in the formation of more effective and innovative solutions (i.e., improved problem-solving) to local challenges.

Third, practitioners engage in intra-local collaboration to market their local economies during the pandemic. One practitioner noted they engaged, in collaboration with local partners, in "a number of initiatives, such as video marketing and general awareness building, trying to build relationships between the local market and local businesses who may not have been aware of the range of [local] products and services" (P30). As reflected in the above quote, practitioners engaged in collaborative marketing to promote their local economy and also to enhance local supply chains.

Practitioners highlighted several examples of collaborative marketing activities. For instance, through intra-local collaboration, one practitioner collaboratively developed "the resiliency map", stating, "We had our meeting together as a group and finished [the resilien-

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cy map] within 24 hours. We launched it, and it was awesome. And that's like unheard of to be able to do that in a municipal setting" (P28). In short, the resiliency map shows local residents what stores were open and where they were located in order to support local businesses. Another example of collaborative marketing activities was shop local campaigns. One practitioner noted, "[we], along with the Chamber, the media, and the Community Economic Development Commission, worked together to promote shop local. So, at this time, it's a lot more emphasis and a lot more money being spent on marketing to support local businesses" (P06). As implied by the previous practitioner's comment, collaborative marketing allowed local actors to pool resources to undertake various marketing initiatives. Collectively marketing the local economy was highlighted by interviewees to be important for supporting local businesses weather the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Barriers to Intra-local Collaboration: *"our businesses are fatigued"*

All practitioners interviewed indicated that they engaged in intra-local collaborative activities during the pandemic; however, they also noted that these activities were not always easily achieved. In particular, practitioners faced two main barriers in their attempts to undertake collaborative activities. The first main barrier was that local actors (e.g., community organizations, other municipal organizations, and local firms) were fatigued during the pandemic. Roughly a quarter of the interviewed practitioners noted that they wanted to engage in more collaborative activities than they had done, but they were not able to because local actors were too fatigued to participate. Specifically, local actors were dealing with an overwhelming number of challenges caused by the pandemic. Therefore, local actors did not always have spare time to engage in collaborative activities because they had to focus all their attention on their basic mandates, such as ensuring their businesses survived or completing their fundamental duties or functions. As expressed by one practitioner, "our businesses are fatigued" (P19). To further illustrate this point, one practitioner commented that some collaborative projects "did not work as we intended because we didn't take into account the fact that businesses were tapped out and had no ability to take on anything else, even if it helped them" (P03). Overall, local actors were fatigued due to challenges brought on by the pandemic; as such, the full extent of intended collaboration could not always be achieved.

The second main barrier faced by practitioners, in their attempts to engage in collaborative activities, was their own staffing capacities. Practitioners indicated that they wanted to engage in a number of collaborative activities, but that they did not have the human resources needed to do so and thus, their collaborative efforts were dwarfed. As conveyed by one practitioner (P07).

> "I think that has been one of the things that has been really disappointing because I think there are amazing things we could have done if we just had the human resources to be able to execute more collaborative activities because there were easy things to implement. They didn't cost a lot of money. It was just the lack of staff".

Inadequately staffed economic development offices, during the pandemic, was a common theme among interviewees, with over half indicating that they had staffing cuts throughout the pandemic. For example, one practitioner noted, "I lost my whole team during the pandemic" (P14). It is not that most local economic development offices are necessarily understaffed, but that during the pandemic, many practitioners were periodically furloughed, reducing the total collaborative efforts that practitioners could undertake.[3]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper explores practitioners' intra-local collaborative practices in Ontario communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the interviews, the paper finds that practitioners in Ontario engaged in intra-local collaborative practices to a limited extent prior to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the pandemic intensified these locally coordinated practices, resulting in more cemented local partnerships and/or the emergence of new ones. This finding corroborates Hall and Vinodario's (2021) research which found that practitioners in rural communities throughout Canada also engaged in more collaborative economic development practices during the pandemic. Conversely, this finding contrasts previous research by Leibovitz (2003), that finds a general absence of intra-local collaboration in the city-region of Waterloo, Ontario, in the early 2000s. This suggests that economic development practices in Ontario communities may have evolved towards a more intra-local collaborative approach to economic development since the turn of the twenty-first century (or at least during the pandemic), moving away from a more traditional siloed approach. Furthermore, the results from this paper confirm a growing body of literature (see, Bradford, 2010; Renault, 2012) that finds that crises can drastically shift economic development approaches.

Moreover, practitioners noted that they wanted to continue collaborating with their local counterparts after the pandemic, indicating the momentum of intra-local collaboration may be an enduring feature of economic development practices in Ontario communities going forth. The desire for intra-local collaboration has not only been found among local practitioners in Ontario during the pandemic but also throughout Canada. As indicated by Hall & Vinodrai's (2021) findings, rural practitioners nationwide during the pandemic emphasized the need for intra-local collaboration to enhance their community's long-term economic well-being. The gravitation of practitioners towards intra-local collaborative economic development practices in Ontario was underpinned by the realization that "it takes a village" to grow and develop local economies, and thus, synergetic approaches are required to undertake more effective economic development. This realization aligns with the admonition by Leigh & Blakely (2017: 122), who noted that "economic development practitioners must reach well beyond technical know-how to help the community see itself as a social and physical entity".

Practitioners engaged in intra-local collaboration for three main reasons. First, collaboration with local partners allowed practitioners to access a greater pool of resources, such as funds, staffing, and know-how. Several practitioners noted that they would not have been able to undertake certain economic development initiatives if they had been unable to utilize resources provided by their local partners. This finding confirms a growing but limited body of literature (see, Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Leigh & Blakely, 2017), which emphasizes the importance of intra-local collaboration for economic development, as it allows practitioners to draw on the resources of different community actors. Second, intra-local collaboration allowed practitioners to learn and acquire knowledge from their local partners. The sharing of best practices, co-learning, and acquiring knowledge about the challenges faced by their local economies were important for practitioners, as they enhanced their ability to undertake economic development and operate through the pandemic. Third, practitioners engaged in intra-local collaboration to

3 It should be noted that even during stable times, some economic development offices are inadequately resourced (e.g., lacking staffing capacity) to undertake economic development, especially in smaller localities.

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improve their marketing capacity. Through their local partnerships, practitioners were able to market their local economy externally and market local businesses internally, as well as strengthen their local supply chains by connecting local suppliers to local businesses via marketing schemes. Overall, the reasons put forth by practitioners for why they engaged in intra-local collaboration were to increase their ability to undertake economic development and support their local economy during the pandemic.

Practitioners collaborated with local actors to address and solve common problems, such as supply chain disruptions, business closures, and rising unemployment, that they faced during the pandemic. This finding aligns with Agranoff & McGuire's (2003) view that intra-local collaboration revolves around collective problem-solving for issues that cannot be easily addressed by one organization. However, although it played an important part, the findings from this paper suggest that practitioners engaged in intra-local collaboration for more than just problem-solving; they also engaged in collaborative practices because it improved their economic development efforts. For example, practitioners engaged in local partnerships to solve collective problems via brainstorming solutions, sharing information, and acquiring knowledge from one another. Yet, the intent behind sharing information and acquiring knowledge was also for practitioners to learn best practices and new skills to enhance their overall capacity to undertake economic development. Similarly, through local collaboration, practitioners were able to access a greater pool of resources, not only for the purpose of problem-solving, but also to improve their overall economic development efforts. Therefore, the notion of intra-local collaboration should be expanded beyond its current parochial focus on problem-solving to include its ability to enhance the overall capacity of organizations to engage in economic development.

Another important finding from the research was that practitioners faced several barriers in their attempts to undertake intra-local collaborative projects during the pandemic. Specifically, practitioners' collaborative efforts were ultimately minimized by local actors' fatigue as well as their own limited staffing due to economic development staff being furloughed during the pandemic. These barriers reduced the overall collaborative activities in localities. The barriers identified in this study are different from those identified by Leibovitz (2003), who found that mistrust and suspicion between local actors were the main barriers preventing intra-local collaboration in the city-region of Waterloo, Ontario. These different findings provide a more holistic perspective of the barriers to intra-local collaboration, indicating that the primary barriers are not static but change depending on the economic climate that practitioners are confronted with at any given point. Specifically, the barriers identified by Leibovitz (2003) were identified in a period of relative growth, while the barriers found in this study occurred in a period of economic crisis. Thus, the main barriers to intra-local collaboration change with localities fluctuating economic climate.

Based on the results, there are clear advantages in mobilizing entire communities to engage in local economic development, such as increasing the pool of available resources for economic development, enhancing local actors' acquisition of knowledge, and improving local decision-making and the effective implementation of programs. These advantages clearly point to the importance of grass-root development as an effective approach to local economic development. However, this is not to suggest that grass-root approaches are effective for all crises, as the appropriate approach to economic development may differ based on the type of crisis experienced, its time-sensitiveness, and the required technical expertise. For example, when crises are time-sensitive and require technical expertise, top-down models may be more appropriate to provide a quick and technical response; whereas, grass-root models may be more appropriate during crises that are not as time-sensitive and require less technical expertise (e.g., business closures and building local capacity to deal with locally specific issues). Nevertheless, moving forward, local actors and agencies at various levels of government in Ontario should build on this momentum towards intra-local collaboration to enhance localities' economic development efforts.

The primary policy implication from this paper's findings is that all levels of government should aim to bolster intra-local collaboration. Localities in Ontario and other mature economies that have shifted towards intra-local collaboration should maintain this momentum following the pandemic; while, localities that have not experienced the same shift should begin fostering greater intra-local collaboration. Intra-local collaboration is important as it can enhance the development and growth of localities as well as reduce the reliance of practitioners on upper-level government funding for economic development initiatives. Through local collaborative partnerships, practitioners can access a greater pool of resources, which in turn can enhance their ability to undertake economic development. Also, supporting local collaboration can reduce waste produced via the duplication of efforts and provide a more unified vision and collective front when addressing local issues and achieving local objectives. Such a collective front in economic development can enhance localities' capacities (e.g., technological capacity, human capacity, and innovative capacity) and resources and, thus, improve localities' competitiveness (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Leigh & Blakely, 2017).

Specifically, upper-level governments should prioritize funding economic development initiatives that are collaborative in nature to encourage and promote intra-local collaboration.[4] Another approach to increasing intra-local collaboration is to establish community leaders in local economies to mobilize and champion the collective efforts of local actors. Communities are more easily mobilized when there is clear leadership, which is also found to be effective in the rebuilding of local economies following crises, such as the pandemic (Leigh & Blakely, 2017). Therefore, more pronounced or newly established community leadership can maintain or even enhance localities' current momentum towards intra-local collaboration. In short, it should not take another pandemic to increase local collaboration.

Several lessons arise from this paper. First, the evolutionary shift in economic development practices tends to change incrementally over time. However, crises provide windows of opportunity for drastic shifts in local economic development practices. Second, intra-local collaboration is one route to addressing complex and sophisticated problems that have become increasingly more frequent and greater in magnitude over the last several decades. That is, intra-local collaboration enhances practitioners' ability to contend with the more frequent and severe challenges that originate internally (e.g., plant closures and natural disasters) and externally (e.g., the 2008 Great Recession). Specifically, intra-local collaboration enables practitioners to tackle these challenges by increasing their access to a wide range of local resources and improving their acquisition of new skills and knowledge surrounding best economic development practices.

Despite the insights brought forth by this paper, more research is needed. Further research should investigate if the momentum of intra-local collaboration has continued after the pandemic. Also, future research should investigate the depth of local partnerships to determine if they are loosely connected or highly integrated. Further, future research should examine the kind of activities that local collaboration primarily revolves around and what activities still require greater collaborative efforts. For example, do collaborative activities tend to centre around businesses and focus on economic outco-

4 Although there are funding incentives for inter-local collaboration in Ontario from the provincial and federal governments, as far as the authors are aware there is no equivalent programs to incentivize intra-local collaborative activities.

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mes? Also, to what degree do collaborative activities centre around community groups or social service agencies, and focus on social outcomes (e.g., housing availability and stock)? Additionally, further research should examine if intra-local collaborative practices have increased in other localities both within Canada and abroad due to the pandemic. Finally, future research should examine the importance of various types of economic development models, such as grass-root models and top-down models, as well as under which circumstances different models are more appropriate and effective than others.

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